



## King of the Cougars

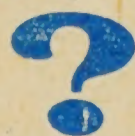


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"I hope we are not taking you too much unawares," said Buffalo Bill; "but a matter of urgent importance has brought me out here."

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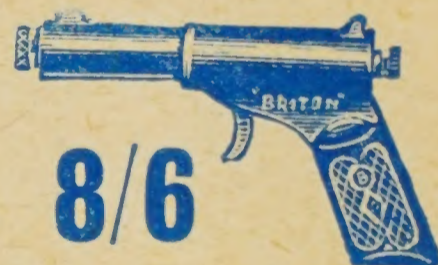
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# King of the Cougars

Buffalo Bill's Big Fight with Bad Men and Wild Beasts

## CHAPTER 1.

### Sheriff Blunden's Fate.

"HERE it is, right enough, Frank. I judged we should come on it again in this direction."

"Trust you for keeping to the line, Bill! There's no bloodhound can beat you for that. But what a place for him to run to!"

Frank Powell looked up at the forbidding cliffs that faced them, and the dark, almost tunnel-like gorge running off to the right. The mouth of the gorge was almost choked with bushes and stunted pines, and the walls came together so close overhead as almost to meet. Compared with the brilliant sunshine outside the place looked dark and particularly uninviting.

The two scouts examined the ground very carefully, only to find that the trail undoubtedly ran towards and into the gorge. But just inside the place Buffalo Bill stopped again, and called Frank Powell's attention to another impression in the soft ground. It was the unmistakable mark of a mountain lion or cougar's pad, and further examination showed numerous others running to and from the gorge.

"It's the same one that we noticed down by the springs," declared Buffalo Bill. "Blunden must have been tracking it."

"Or the cougar tracking him," suggested Frank Powell. "Blunden had bigger game than that to hunt."

"Still, he may have been tempted to follow this brute. From the size of the pads it must be a particularly fine specimen."

"Don't you believe it, Bill," said Frank uneasily. "Ben Blunden don't change his fox. If he's on the line of one nothing will turn him—if I know anything about him—and he's not

likely to have quitted the trail of Black Blunt to follow a cougar."

"You only think as I do, Frank, only I didn't care to own up to my uneasiness. Get your guns ready. We may need them here, and the light isn't extra good."

Powell was too good a huntsman to neglect the caution. Buffalo Bill led the way. For some distance the path was obstructed by the bushes, but as they passed further from the light these thinned out until at last they could walk comfortably and see some distance ahead. Suddenly Buffalo Bill stopped and pointed to something lying in the centre of the path.

"It's a hat!" declared Frank Powell. "And Ben's hat, too, for a dollar!"

"Then that looks bad for Ben," said Buffalo Bill.

Frank Powell's surmise was found to be correct. The hat proved to belong to Ben Blunden, Sheriff of Uvada, all doubt on that point being settled by the fact that his name was found written under the head-band.

"This begins to look serious, indeed, Frank," said the scout. "I'm afraid Ben's done for this trip."

"Yes; look here. Someone fell here."

"And was dragged along the side here. By heavens! the cougar's track is along it, too!"

"Then that discounts the idea that Buck Blunt killed him."

"Seems so. But we don't know that Ben Blunden's dead yet, Frank. There's an off-chance that it wasn't his body that was dragged along here. Yet I can't see any footmarks about."

"No; you may count him out, Bill. But go careful. The brute that killed him may be lurking up in those rocks."

"A likely place for it. But, see, the trail ceases here. The brute couldn't have carried him up there."

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"Not unless it was an extraordinarily big one."

"Yet he's gone up there, sure. There is some blood on that flat piece, or I am mistaken."

The two stood for a moment staring up at the broken and rugged sides of the gorge. It was just such a place as a mountain lion would choose for its lair, and was a difficult and dangerous place to explore. The cougars, almost the same colour as the rocks, might easily lie amongst them and never be seen. But such risks daunted neither of the scouts. They only waited long enough to examine the place so as to discover the best way up. Then Buffalo Bill started to climb, whilst Frank Powell, keeping on a little, mounted from another direction.

The job was not difficult in itself, as the broken nature of the rocks offered plenty of hand and foot hold. But every yard had to be negotiated carefully for fear the great beasts were on the watch.

The tracks of cougars were constantly seen wherever a little loose sand or soil had collected on the ridge, and at last Buffalo Bill came to a halt in front of a low opening. Here there were more traces of blood. Without doubt the unfortunate sheriff had been killed and dragged inside.

Buffalo Bill waited for Frank to join him.

"There's more in this than we bargained for, Frank," he said, in a low voice. "Look here. That cougar never carried Ben up here. He was hauled up by a lariat or rope."

He pointed to the ground in front of the opening. It was a small platform on which the soil had collected sufficiently to carry the tracks of man or beast. Right at the edge were the marks of boots, several of them deeply indented, showing that great weight had been thrown on the foot. The edge of the rock itself was rubbed into quite an appreciable groove, which Buffalo Bill's experience told him was the effect of a rope drawing up some heavy body.

"There's black work here, Frank. Man and beast working together, perhaps. But man for certain. The cougar may have come along after-

wards, attracted by the smell of blood. We must follow this up. I'll stay here whilst you go down and get some wood for torches. Some of those pine-tops will be just the thing."

Frank Powell was off instantly, whilst Buffalo Bill sat turning this thing over in his mind. Ben Blunden had written him some days previously, knowing he was in the neighbourhood, to tell him of the appearance in Uvada of Buck Blunt, who was wanted for several State offences. The sheriff knew that Cody had been searching for this man, and told him he should arrest him and hold him until the scout arrived.

Buffalo Bill and Frank Powell got to Uvada only to find that Buck Blunt and Sheriff Blunden had both disappeared. Where they had gone no one knew, but it was surmised that Blunt had got wind of the sheriff's intention and had bolted, and that the sheriff had then gone on his trail. This was the more likely, as two men at different places later on reported that they had seen the sheriff making for the hills.

The scout instantly went with one of them to the place, and after considerable difficulty succeeded in finding Ben Blunden's trail, which, together with Frank Powell, he had followed through all its windings to this tragical termination. There was not an instant's doubt in his mind that Buck Blunt had inveigled the sheriff to this spot, shot him, and drawn him up to that well-hidden cave so that no trace of him should be found. The cougar may or may not have had its den there, but it seemed probable that it had only followed the scent of the blood.

Frank returned with the pine-knots, one of which was quickly lighted, and the two entered the cave, keenly alive to the risk they ran in so doing, and ready to fight on the first sign of danger. But they had not to search far. Not twenty yards from the entrance lay all that remained of Sheriff Blunden. There was no need to look twice to see that the body had been partially devoured by a beast of prey.

"Poor Ben!" ejaculated Buffalo Bill. "He died with his boots on, as he would have wished. We can only hope a merciful bullet killed him before the cougar got hold of him."

## AN INQUIRING STRANGER.

Even Frank Powell, inured as he was to the sight of death in all forms, shuddered and turned away from the pitiful object. Then he turned to Buffalo Bill, his eyes gleaming dangerously.

"We've got to see this thing through, Bill. This is no mere killing by a mountain lion. There's man's work here. Ben was fully armed. Where are his rifle and revolvers?"

"In the keeping of the man who shot him."

"And that man we'll track down, if it's the last act!"

"I'm with you, Frank, all the time. The thing is to find a clue, and this place should supply it."

Simultaneously they bent their torches to the ground to discover any tracks. The floor of the cavern was of rock. Not a single track could they find. But they moved forward, hoping to come to some part where the trail would be marked.

The cavern seemed to extend a considerable way, but, so far as they could see, there were no galleries running out of it. The roof in places rose so high that the flickering light of the torches could not reach it. The walls, for the most part, were straight and smooth, giving no chance of being scaled. There was one corner which they had not explored, and towards this they moved, when the whole cavern seemed to rock with the sound of a succession of terrific roars. Again and again the tremendous sound boomed and reverberated through the cavern, the scouts, standing with uplifted torches, trying in vain to spot the animal which was creating the uproar.

At last Buffalo Bill saw two bright lights in a far corner of the cave. He knew them to be the eyes of a mountain lion.

"There! to your right, Frank!" he whispered. "I can see the brute's eyes, but it's bad shooting."

"Wait a bit, Bill. If he attacks he will have to come into the range of our light, and we can easily kill him. I see him now, over there!"

"No, that's not the place, unless there is a second lion. Gee! That's what it is, and I swear that's a third!"

"We shall have a crowd, then, soon,"

laughed Frank Powell. "I don't mind tackling them in proper light, but I think our handicap is too great. We'd best quit, eh?"

"I see nothing else for it. They'll attack us soon, and there may be others."

As if the words had been a signal a number of other eyes gleamed out, and such a thunder of roaring broke that the scouts were almost deafened.

Convinced now that it would only be madness to remain, the two friends began their retreat. The first step they made seemed to madden the animals, for they bounded forward until the foremost could be distinguished in the torchlight.

Buffalo Bill stopped and levelled his revolver, when, just as the finger was pressing the trigger, another sound rose above the tumult of the beasts.

It was the cry of a human being!

At the sound the roaring of the lions ceased as if by magic, and those who were nearest the scouts slunk back. Then a bright flash lit up the far end of the cavern, which echoed anew to the crack of a rifle, and a bullet whizzed close by Buffalo Bill's head.

"Come on, Frank, we must get!" he cried. "The odds are too heavy," and turning they ran swiftly towards the entrance.

## CHAPTER 2.

### An Inquiring Stranger.

"CAN you direct me to Brun Filson's place?"

The speaker, a dapper little man, well-dressed and well-groomed, gazed round at the group of men as if he did not particularly care who answered him so long as he got the necessary information. They for their part turned and stared at him. It is one thing to ask for information in the West, and quite another thing to get it.

The men grouped in front of Lascelles's whisky-dive were no exception to the rule. Eight pairs of eyes scanned the stranger half-curiously, half-indifferently, and eight pairs of hands were thrust a little deeper into as many pockets. Otherwise the representatives of Rock Owl did not let on that they had heard the question.

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The little man eyed them for fully a minute. Then a smile spread slowly over his face as he stepped forward.

"At the place where I come from," he said blandly, "there has lately been an epidemic of lockjaw. I see the disease has spread further west. There is only one remedy so far discovered which is a certain cure for it. Gentlemen, you must allow me to prescribe for you. The dispensary, I believe, is behind you!"

Still the group seemed not to have heard him, for they answered not a word. But they opened out to allow him to pass, and then, turning as if at a word of command, followed solemnly into the saloon.

"Sir," said the stranger to the bartender, "these gentlemen are no doubt known to you. Their several idiosyncrasies and tastes in the matter of poison are also known to you. Correct me if I am wrong. No? Then oblige me by administering to each and all of them, and such of their friends who may be adjacent," he added as he saw several others approaching, "a sufficient modicum of their particular cordial as will satisfy their temporary drought."

The bartender took a deep breath as the stranger paused, and gazed from him to the crowd behind in an inquiring sort of way. What he saw must have satisfied him, for he proceeded with astonishing celerity to fill up a long row of glasses with various delectable but deadly concoctions, and passed them to the different individuals for whom they were mixed.

"Mine is a gin-sling," said the stranger, as the bartender paused in front of him.

This having been provided he raised it high above his head.

"Here's to you, gentlemen!" he cried in a loud voice, but without turning.

Sixteen hands elevated as many glasses, sixteen heads went back, and thirty-two lips gave a resounding smack as the glasses were returned to the bar.

"Now, stranger," cried a deep voice, "perhaps, havin' done the honours of the place, you'll oblige by givin' this 'ere enlightened an' superior crowd yer handle?"

"Silas Smalltalk is my name, gentlemen, a name which I doubt not is known to some few of you."

"Nary known, 's far 's I'm concerned," retorted the other. "An' what mout be yer business?"

"The business which I reckon we are all engaged on," said the stranger softly—"the business of making money—honestly if possible, but making it."

"Then all I kin say is you've come to a mighty poor place for the purpose," answered the other. "If it was ter lose money, now——"

"Then some of you would be making it, eh?" laughed Smalltalk. "Therefore, my coming here would benefit the society of this enlightened and very superior town, and I should reap profit by gaining experience."

"Say, you isn't trav'lin' fer a gilt-edged encyclopædia, is you? You talk like one, anyway. What's yer game?"

"Mankind, sir. And for that, I take it, one place is as good as another, and no worse than the last."

The answer seemed to stagger Pete Curwen, the man who had so far carried on the dialogue. He could only stare at Silas Smalltalk as if he saw a specimen of a new species till then unknown to him. Another man stepped forward, who from his generally smart appearance and daredevil look, was evidently a "sport."

"If that's your game," he said blandly, "I let you know you're likely to run up ag'n' trouble, young man. This is my hunting-ground, an' I don't 'low to let no one crowd me, onless he proves his title to top dog. Thar's a quiet little corner over there. You call your game, an' if you down me I'm willing to leave you in possesh. But if not——"

"I'll stay, anyway, my friend," smiled Silas. "I fear you mistake my meaning. The word 'game,' I take it, is capable of being used in more than one sense. Take, for instance——"

"Take nawthin'!" retorted another man angrily. "Blamed ef you ain't like a confounded balloon—all gas an' precious little sand. You'd talk the tail offen my bronc. Play spotty or quit."

"Wasn't you askin' fer Brun Filson's?" cried another. "P'r'aps

## LIVELY DOINGS AT ROCK OWL.

he's yer game stranger? You'll hev all ther fun you need runnin' him down, I reckon."

A roar of laughter went round. Brun Filson was evidently a pretty hard case to make the idea of the stranger tackling him so ludicrous to the company.

"Yes, sir," said Pete Curwen, impressively; "if you've gotten any business or pleasure ter negotiate with the 'Cougar King' you'd best mosey off there whilst it's daylight. You'll need a few hours ter talk round him."

"Then we come back to my original question," said Smalltalk, apparently in no way abashed by the hints of trouble in store. "Perhaps now you will have the kindness to answer it. Can you direct me to his house?"

"No sich difficult job, sir," said Pete, and taking Smalltalk's arm he led him to the door.

"Thar's his shanty," he said, pointing to a hill standing a mile or more from the camp. "That's it you kin see toppin' them rocks, ef your eyesight's good. Take partic'ler note of the ways up there, for there may be need fer you to come down a blamed sight quicker'n you went up. Savvy?"

"I understand you perfectly, Pete Curwen," said the little man. "I'm indebted to you for the information and your well-meant hint. There seems no particular reason why I should stay now. I hope to see you all later," and raising his hat in a half-jocose manner he quietly lighted a cigar and strolled away.

"Now, who in thunder kin he be?" said Pete Curwen, uneasily. "Knew my handle, did he? It warn't mentioned by no one whiles he wuz around. Then how come he to know it? Any of you boys sot eyes on him before?"

No one had, and all watched the little man with ill-concealed uneasiness as he strolled quietly down the "street" towards the hill. But the bartender called them and drew Curwen aside, whispering to him.

"What!" shouted the latter. "Him? Cyrus Hardy? And I never knew it! Why in thunder didn't yer speak before? I'll stop his talk, anyway. Let me out, boys. Either that man or Pete Curwen dies in five minutes!"

The crowd parted, and Pete rushed out, his gun in hand. No one followed. The chances of getting a stray bullet were too obvious. They watched Curwen running clumsily along the rough street, heard him shout, and saw the little man stop and turn round. So far as they could see, Silas Smalltalk—or Cyrus Hardy—drew no weapon. He just stood and waited for Curwen to come up.

Flourishing his revolver Curwen rushed towards him. But just as the onlookers were expecting to hear the report of the gun Pete lowered the weapon and walked slowly up to the man he had promised to shoot.

"Blest if he's goin' ter shoot after all!" exclaimed the sport. "Why, look at that! He's walked up to him as meek as Moses. Now they're talkin'."

"Wonder what about?" cried another. "Who is he, anyway, Jake?"

"You'd best ask Pete when he comes back," answered the bartender cautiously. "If he's willin' ter talk you'll hear, I reckon."

But that is just what Pete was not. The crowd saw him leave Hardy and come walking slowly back staring at the ground. He passed "Lascelles's House" without looking up, and reaching his shack went in and shut the door.

### CHAPTER 3.

#### Lively Doings at Rock Owl.

THE instant the two scouts started to run the infernal uproar of the savage lions broke out with redoubled violence. So terrific was it that they scarcely heard the reports of the rifle as their unknown assailant fired twice again. But the hum of the bullets close by told them that he was still "making practice," and nothing but the uncertainty of the light saved them from instant death.

But a worse enemy was after them. The cougars, breaking from their restraint, came bounding after them like so many great cats chasing a couple of rats. Their safety depended on their speed of foot. It was a race with death. And the scouts won—for a time, at any rate.

They reached the mouth of the cavern about five yards ahead of the

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mountain lions, and slipping instantly on one side, prepared to kill them as they emerged. But they were astonished to find that not one of them came out.

"They've been called off, Frank," said Buffalo Bill. "That villain, whoever he is, knows we should make a stand here and kill every one of his pets. He's ordered them back!"

"Then we'd best get down while we have the chance. It would not take him long to pick us off once he got a little daylight to help."

"Not down, but up, Frank," said Buffalo Bill. "He could pick us off too easy as we scrambled down there. We shall have the drop on him if we're above him."

Frank Powell saw the wisdom of this advice. He glanced upwards. The broken character of the rocks seemed to continue to the top of the cliff. There should be no difficulty in scaling them.

"Up you go, Frank!" added Buffalo Bill, as the roaring broke out afresh. "Our friend's on the move, I suspect. I'll stay here and keep him from getting too pressing till you have taken up a commanding position. Then you can watch while I climb."

Powell saw that Buffalo Bill's plan was the wisest, and started directly. The scout watched the mouth of the cavern carefully. One small flat head half-showed—the head of a cougar! The nostrils moved rapidly as the creature sniffed the air. Then, as it scented the scout, its lips were drawn back in a horrible snarl, exposing the cruel fangs.

Waiting for a moment till the animal had advanced a little so as to expose the whole of its wicked-looking head Buffalo Bill fired, aiming just below the ear. The cougar uttered a whining cry and leaped forward, with head thrown up and back, its powerful paws stretched out with cruel claws extended and its back bent inwards. The spasmodic leap carried it clear of the little platform out over the abyss into which it fell, twisting over in mid-air with frightful contortions of its body and limbs. There followed a dull thud as it struck the rocks far below.

That shot seemed to cow the rest of

the brutes, for a sudden silence succeeded the angry clamour. This still continued, till Buffalo Bill heard the Doctor Scout whistle, and looking up saw him perched on a jutting rock which commanded the mouth of the cavern. He waved his hand, and instantly started to climb, reaching him without anyone showing up from the cavern below.

There they waited, hoping that the individual who had fired at them would appear, so that, at any rate, they could become aware of his identity. But though they stayed for considerably over an hour they were disappointed. Neither man nor beast ventured outside.

"The lesson was too severe, Frank. They probably think we are still outside the cave, only waiting to get a shot home. He's a careful rascal, anyway, and keeps his pets in order."

"You think, then, that those brutes are under his command, do you?"

"Well, so it seemed. I have known several cases of the same kind, and so have you, for that matter."

"You think it is Buck Blunt?"

"Ah, that's another question! We are not yet certain that Blunt reached the cavern at all. The sheriff, poor fellow, must have thought he went up the gorge, and he probably did; but it doesn't follow that he went to the cave, or even knew of its existence."

"No, that's so. Poor Ben was killed some way off it and dragged up there. It's quite on the cards that Buck had no hand in his murder, but passed straight up the gorge and got away."

"Then that gives us another job, Frank. We've got to find Buck Blunt and discover the secret of the cavern. The man in there is the murderer of Ben Blunden."

"Well, we shan't do it by sitting here, Bill. The brute won't show up till he's certain the coast's clear. Maybe there's another entrance, too. S'pose we take a look round above there, and make sure, if we can, whether Buck Blunt went through the gorge."

"Right-o. It's the best we can do."

With many downward glances they completed the ascent, and cast about for some chance opening into the

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cavern. But they soon saw the hopelessness of this. The plateau on which they stood extended for some distance, and the slopes on its further side were covered with pine scrub, making the chance of finding any other entrance extremely small. They therefore made for the head of the gorge and examined the ground all about it, but without success, as far as Buck Blunt was concerned.

It was late now, and neither scout relished the idea of spending the night in the hills without food. They had started out to trail the sheriff without any idea that he would bring them so far, and had not provided against such a contingency. To get back to Uvada now was out of the question, not only on account of the distance, but also for the reason that they wanted to be near the gorge, so as to start out on a new hunt for Buck Blunt's trail as soon as it was light enough.

"There's only one camp I know of round here," said Buffalo Bill, "and that's Rock Owl; and a pretty tough nest it is, too."

"That's not much odds, so long as we can get a bed and supper, Bill. You're old enough to take care of yourself; and besides, we might find out something about our friend of the cavern and his playful little pets."

"Exactly. Then I guess Rock Owl has it; but if we are recognised there look out for trouble."

Buffalo Bill led the way back over the plateau they had already explored, and passing down through the woods, pointed out the lights of the camp scarcely a mile away. A couple of men passed them just after they crossed the camp limits. The light from a shanty window shone full on Buffalo Bill's face at the moment. One of the men started as he recognised the scout and hurried his companion on into the darkness.

Buffalo Bill and Frank Powell had little difficulty in discovering where the "hotel" was in Rock Owl. Although lights burned in many of the rough shacks no sound came from them to show that they were inhabited. But "Lascelles's House" made up by its noise for all the silence of the rest of the camp.

Singing, shouting, the stamping of feet, coarse laughter, and angry quarrelling all combined to produce a chorus fit to rival Bedlam. The windows were all ablaze with the light within. A noisy group was standing at the open door, casting gigantic shadows across the "street." The whole camp of Rock Owl, with very few exceptions, was congregated in the place.

The entrance of the two strangers caused a momentary lull, and Buffalo Bill took the opportunity to "pay his footing" by inviting those so inclined to refresh themselves at his expense. Everyone in the room seemed to have a very strong inclination, and the hubbub broke out with redoubled energy under the fresh impetus of a free drink.

The scout's glance took in every man in the place, but so far as he could say they were all strangers to him. The sport who had challenged Cyrus Hardy to a game was making a bank against a dozen men who looked as if they had not a dollar between them. Yet the notes, "cartwheels," and small bags of "dust" passed freely enough. There was evidently no lack of the "ready" amongst the citizens of Rock Owl.

The two scouts, declining numerous invitations to join in a friendly game of poker, euchre, or faro, sat quietly talking in a corner, watching the crowd and keeping their ears open for any chance words which might be useful.

Some time passed, when the swing-doors opened and Pete Curwen entered.

"Hallo, Pete!" shouted one of the men. "You ain't killed, then? Nor you didn't kill the little man, eh?"

Pete did not answer as all heads turned to look at him. He appeared to be worrying about something and looked morose.

"What'd he say to you, Pete?" cried the same man, who seemed to like the idea of chipping the man. "Why didn't you jump him as you started out ter do, eh?"

Still Pete did not answer, but an angry flush came over his face.

"You was goin' ter chaw him up, wasn't you, Pete?" continued his tormentor. "You talk mighty big sometimes, yit you ain't so quick on ther draw as you want us to b'lieve."

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"Blame yer! what d'yer mean by that?" shouted Pete Curwen. "You jest step right out hyar and let me talk to you. You'll sing a different tune by the time I've done with you, Bill Gafter!"

"Shoo! jest shut up, Bill!" cried Jake, the bartender. "We don't want no shootin' here. Ef you'n Pete wanter quarrel git outside and have it to yourselves."

"I ain't qua'ling, bless you!" laughed Bill. "It's mighty hard a man cain't ask after a pal's health without being accused of bein' nasty. Set up the drinks, Jake, and give Pete an extra soother an' me."

"I ain't drinkin'," said Pete, sullenly. "You c'n keep it fer yourself, and ef you still want somethin' stronger I kin oblige you or anyone else in this blamed village!"

This surly reply nettled Bill Gafter, to say nothing of the refusal to drink with him.

"Your little friend ain't improved yer manners, Pete," he growled, "or p'r'aps we isn't good 'nough comp'ny fer you now? S'pose you reckon to be a friend of Brun Filson, the Cougar King, eh?"

The two scouts glanced at each other as the words rang out. Here was something interesting. It might only be a coincidence, but the name and title struck them as being a little more than peculiar.

"What d'you mean by that?" yelled Pete furiously, striding forward towards Gafter.

"What do I mean? I mean that your little man was a friend, or you wouldn't have toned down so easy, p'r'aps; and as he's a friend of Brun Filson's, I s'posed you'd be j'inin' the select circle."

"Then you can keep yer 's'posin's' to yerself, or you'll find more trouble than you kin tote," retorted Pete.

The man was quite cool now, whilst Bill Gafter, on the contrary, lost control of himself and sprang up, eager to accept the challenge. Those standing or sitting near the two moved out of the way with commendable promptitude, but Pete called to reassure them.

"We ain't got no room fer shootin',

gents," he laughed. "If Bill's game ter take the other end o' this rag we kin fight acrost it quiet an' comfort'ble, without disturbin' you all."

He drew his neckerchief off and placed one end between his teeth. His bowie-knife flashed from his belt and he stood ready.

It was a challenge of the most deadly description known in the West. Each combatant holds one end of the cloth in his teeth, so that they are only separated by that distance. Then they cut and carve at each other until one or the other falls or drops the cloth.

Bill Gafter sprang forward eagerly enough, seized his end of the cloth, and stood ready, while the others crowded round, though leaving plenty of room for the combatants.

Their hands were raised, their right feet advanced, all ready to deliver or guard the first blow, when again the door swung open and a man entered, gazing round furtively.

The moment Buffalo Bill saw him he recognised the man he was after, Buck Blunt, the supposed murderer of Sheriff Blunden!

### CHAPTER 4.

#### Startling News.

THERE were so many men standing between the scout and the doorway that Buck Blunt could not see him, or, if he did, certainly did not recognise him. After that one quick glance he stepped forward, the door swinging to behind him, and stood for a second eyeing the combatants as if scarcely realising what they were up to. They, for their part, had both turned to see who the newcomer was, for most of those who lived in Rock Owl lived in daily dread of the sheriff. But seeing it was only one of themselves—for Buck Blunt had often visited the village in times of trouble—the belligerents again faced each other.

Buck, however, leaped forward and stood between them, holding them apart with a hand on each man's chest.

"Let up, you fools!" he said hoarsely. "Ain't you got more sense than to fight amongst yo'selves? Thar'll be all the fightin' goin' on soon that any of you need. Quit an' shake, or I'll take a hand myself!"

## STARTLING NEWS.

"What's it got ter do with you, Buck?" cried Bill Grafters angrily. "This ain't your funeral. Take a back seat, and we'll settle our difs without your interference."

"Let up, I say!" retorted Buck Blunt, still keeping them apart without much apparent effort.

He was a tall, immensely-powerful man, of undoubted courage of the brute kind.

"Let up, I say!" he repeated. "There's trouble ahead, and you'll have all ther fightin' you want."

"What's the row, Buck?" shouted several of the others, alarmed by the man's words.

"The row is that Sheriff Blunden's bin put out, and every sheriff's posse in the country 'll be chasin' around to find out about it."

"Well, an' what then? They won't find nothin' here. We ain't killed him! P'r'aps you know who did, Buck?"

"P'r'aps I do and p'r'aps I don't. That's for me to say. But I know this much: That there's a good few of you as don't want no sheriffs askin' awkward questions."

"Mighty good of you to warn us, Buck," laughed several savagely. "I reckon we all kin take keer of our hides ag'in' any sheriff's posse as crawls. You got some other reason for stoppin' the sport, ain't you, Buck?"

"Yessir, I is. I want Pete Curwen, and I want Pete Curwen alive! He'll be no blamed use once he's carved up. Not to me, anyway. If Bill Grafters wants ter finish this out he kin do it arter I done finished with him."

"Ain't I got no say-so in this here business?" interposed Pete Curwen during the silence which followed this final declaration. "Here's you wantin' me, Buck, and Bill Grafters howlin' after me, too. Yit I guess I come in somewheres on my own, don't I? It was me challenged Bill, and, barrin' that, I don't know as he's any partic'lar call ter fight at all. If it's all ther same to him, I'll climb down fer the time. Ef he ain't satisfied, I reckon he'll know where to find me later on."

"Oh, as to that, if you's satisfied,

so'm I!" answered Grafters airily, as he dropped the cloth and sheathed his bowie. "P'r'aps Buck will oblige by sayin' what he wants yer fer?"

"An' p'r'aps he won't!" retorted Buck. "But I let you boys into one secret. You're all makin' purty light of what I told you. You mayn't think much of a sheriff's posse, but you're li'ble to be buckin' up ag'in' somethin' rayther out of the ordinary this journey."

"How so? What you drivin' at, Buck? Who's out ag'in' us this trip?"

"Buffler Bill an' ther Doctor Scout!"

A sudden hush fell on the crowd as Buck slowly pronounced the words. Scarcely a man stirred. Their eyes were riveted on the speaker with looks almost of fear.

"It's jest as I say, boys," continued Buck Blunt. "I met a man out fr'm Uvada. The sheriff, I don't mind tellin' you, was runnin' me, and got into trouble. The scouts happened on Uvada jest about the time, and took the trail. They may be in this town now fer all I know. Does any of you know 'em by sight?"

Not a soul answered. Rock Owl had not been visited by Buffalo Bill for many years, and it so happened that in the small community not one had ever met the scout, though all knew him well enough by reputation. But Bill and the doctor sat quiet, almost impassive as it seemed, listening to this strange announcement of their present whereabouts.

Frank Powell, by an almost imperceptible sign, had questioned whether it would not be well to hold up the crowd at once, but Buffalo Bill had warned him to remain quiet. He hoped to glean further information before proceeding to extremes. Buck had not by any means admitted that he had killed the sheriff. Yet he seemed to know all about it, and the scout was more anxious now to find out the mystery of the cougar cavern than to arrest Buck Blunt.

The latter looked all round at each man as he put his question.

"Waal," he ejaculated, "'tain't often you meet a crowd of toughs and find none of 'em has ever run up ag'in'

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Buffalo Bill. Either we're blamed lucky, or we ain't so black's we're painted."

"Thar's one man as knows him!" exclaimed Pete Curwen. "He passed through the camp to-day."

"Who's he?" asked Buck Blunt.

"Cy Hardy, the small-talk kid."

"Is he here?" cried Buck, staring round afresh. "Why didn't you tell me? Whar is he?"

"Up at the Cougar King's place."

"Phew! You don't say? That thickens ther business some. Pete, we've got ter march. Gents, I wish you all a very happy evening. Now, Pete, slide!"

He gained the door, threw it open, and allowed Pete Curwen to pass out first. Then, with a final wave of the hand, he, too, went out into the darkness. A hubbub of voices broke out as he disappeared. Questions, answers, threats, oaths, plans of offence and defence were all mingled together in a babel of noise.

Buffalo Bill and Frank Powell rose during the confusion and walked quietly towards the door. Several suspicious glances were thrown at them as they did so, but they quitted the place without meeting obstruction.

About fifty yards from the "hotel" door, however, they almost ran into a little man who was coming towards the place. The light from the window shone on their faces, but his was in the shadow. Muttering a half-hearted apology he passed them and went into the saloon, whilst the two scouts instantly doubled back and walked away in the other direction to which he had seen them going.

A long-drawn howl of fury rose from "Lascelles's House" soon after the little man had entered.

"They're on to us now, Frank!" whispered the scout. "Did you see who that was going in?"

"No. His face was in the shadow, and I hadn't got my focus properly."

"That was Cyrus Hardy. You heard them mention his name in there? We've run up against a hornets' nest, I'm thinking, and are not at the end of the story yet."

"What's he doing down here, I

wonder? He's only just out of State's prison over the Marshall affair."

"That's what we've got to find out. They said in there that he was visiting the Cougar King. That man, whoever he is, mixes with some strange beauties. Frank, we've got to discover him. There's a mystery about him that wants unravelling. Get in with him, and I believe we shall be able to lay our hands on all the other birds as we want them, and discover the secret of Ben Blunden's death into the bargain."

"We shall discover the secret of our own if we don't look out!" whispered Frank Powell. "Those fellows have got out of the hotel by some other door. They're scattering all about. Here come half a dozen this way. We'd best slide."

Having no desire to waste time and cartridges by trying conclusions with the angry Rock Owlers, Buffalo Bill took the hint and hurried away. They were seen, it seems, for a yell went up behind them, and was further emphasised by several pistol-shots, which, however, went far wide of the mark. But the darkness was all in their favour, and though the Rock Owlers, who were now in full chase, had the advantage of knowing every inch of the locality the scouts had little difficulty in dodging them, and, turning again in their tracks, went off in the direction of Samaria, lying some twelve miles to the north of Rock Owl Camp.

## CHAPTER 5.

### A Man Above Suspicion.

SAMARIA was a town which prided itself a good deal on its importance. It boasted of a dozen or more stone buildings, a church, a court-house, and municipal offices, which somehow looked as if they had strayed away from a large city and got lost in the wilds. These were conspicuous amongst the general mass of frame buildings of all sorts of sizes and designs, and the court-house actually was disgraced by having as next-door neighbour one of the original log houses which had figured as one of the first dwelling-places set up in the place.

Of course, with such buildings to live

## A MAN ABOVE SUSPICION.

up to, the citizens were at pains to appear well in the sight of the envious world. Anything like drunkenness and rioting was put down with a high hand, and the Vigilance Committee of Samaria was noted the country through for its strictness and impartiality in correcting the froward.

The head of this committee, Nathan Conley by name, was a regular Spartan in this respect. Whoever committed a crime or overstepped the bounds of public morals was pretty sure to get a visit from Conley and his posse. If the crime was not of very great magnitude a warning was all that the transgressors need fear, but if it were anything serious woe to him if Conley and his myrmidons caught him.

Altogether Samaria was a model of law and order under Conley's "government."

Buffalo Bill knew the man and liked him in many ways. None knew better than he how difficult it was to keep order in such a country, where all sorts and conditions of men were constantly coming and going.

It was no uncommon thing for Conley to ride abroad at night, accompanied by a few of his posse, to see that the town was not being disturbed by any unruly spirits. One night he had ridden out rather further than was usual, perhaps, for he was a good two miles from the town limits, when a couple of men stepped out of a side-track into the road, calling him by name. The moon was now up and enabled him to recognise one of the men.

"Buffalo Bill!" he exclaimed. "What brings you out here and at this time?"

"You yourself, Conley," answered the scout, as he walked forward. "Frank Powell and I were on our way to see you."

"And for what reason? How can I help you?"

"In many ways, I hope. But as you seem to be going home we can talk it over on the way. In the first place," said Buffalo Bill, as he walked along by the horse's side, "you have not, perhaps, heard of Ben Blunden's death?"

"What! Ben Blunden of Uvada?"

"The same. He was killed only a comparatively short while since."

"By whom?"

"That's what we want to find out."

"Do you suspect anyone?"

"Yes—two, in fact. One we know—Buck Blunt. The other we suspect, but we don't know him."

"That's odd. You know his name, though?"

"No; unless it is Brun Filson, the Cougar King."

Conley started and set his teeth hard.

"What makes you suspect him?" he asked.

"Because Frank and I found poor Blunden in a cave which swarmed with cougars. He had been partially devoured."

"But I don't see the connection between them and the Cougar King."

"Perhaps not; more do we, except in the name. We were in hopes you could enlighten us. Don't you know this man?"

"Yes, I know the man you have heard of as the Cougar King, and I know that he is quite incapable of such a deed."

"You know him as well as that, eh? And you can vouch for him?"

"As I can for myself. At any rate, he has lived out there in the hills for many years, and no one who has known him could ever suspect him of doing such a deed."

"Why is he called the Cougar King?"

"For the reason that he has a great natural power over all animals, and has succeeded in rearing a few cubs which follow him about and obey him like dogs. It is a dangerous amusement, to my mind, but he only laughs at my fears."

"I may be all abroad in my suspicions," said Buffalo Bill. "I must candidly admit I have nothing else to guide me except the coincidence of hearing of this man and his pets just after the experience Powell and I have had. You shall hear the story and judge for yourself."

As they were now within the town limits the explanation was postponed till Nathan Conley's house was reached, where he invited them to enter, and provided a substantial meal for them. During its discussion Buffalo Bill told of the tracking of the sheriff, the discovery of the gorge and the cave, with the finding of the mutilated body.

Conley's interest deepened as the

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scout described the attack by the cougars and their hidden assailant and their own forced retreat from the cavern.

"It is all very strange and wonderful," he said, "and I do not wonder now that you were struck by the name of the Cougar King. Such a man as fired at you must have had a certain amount of control over those savage brutes, but Brun Filson's powers do not extend to such a pass as that. These were full-grown beasts that attacked you. He does not pretend to do more than train cubs. As soon as they are full grown he either destroys them or lets them run wild. Yet there must be someone who possesses this wonderful gift, though I never heard of the existence of such a being. You say this gorge is near Rock Owl?"

"At no very great distance," said Buffalo Bill. "Hearing that the Cougar King lived near that den of thieves made me all the more convinced we had dropped on our man."

"Naturally. 'Pon my word, if I hadn't known Brun Filson as I do I should have jumped to the same conclusion. You heard this man speak, didn't you? D'you think you would recognise his voice again?"

"That is difficult to say. To begin with, the voice would sound very different in a cavern, and the noise of the animals would further disguise it. Still, there were certain tones in it which might distinguish it sufficiently to be recognised."

"Then you shall put it to the test," declared Conley. "If you care to, we will ride out to-morrow and interview Brun Filson, the Cougar King. At any rate, he might be able to tell us something. There are few men that know the hills better than he does."

"I should like to meet him," assented Buffalo Bill, "and the sooner the better. You know Buck Blunt, of course?"

"What sheriff or Vigilante in this part of the country doesn't?" exclaimed Conley. "I ran him out of Samaria four years ago, and, so far as I know he's never put foot over the town limits since."

"You know a good many of the Rock Owlers?"

"Quite a few!" laughed Conley.

"Those few owe their choice of that place to my objection to their mode of living here."

"Then I fancy you would be likely to get a very warm welcome if you ventured into the Rock Owl Camp."

"That's more than probable. There are several who would like to have a quiet talk with me there, and a shooting-match afterwards."

"D'you know Pete Curwen?"

Conley's eyes shifted for a second.

"I'm not certain," he said slowly. "Have you got anything up against him?"

"Only the fact that he is a crony of Blunt's. But I suppose half the men in Rock Owl are that?"

"Yes, they all hang together. Scratch one and you scratch the lot. If you're going to look for Buck Blunt there and try to take him you'll have to reckon with every man in the place."

"So I imagine. Well, we'll go this trip to Brun Filson's with you first thing to-morrow morning, and Buck Blunt can be attended to afterwards."

"That'll suit me, and I fancy you'll be surprised at what you find at the Cougar King's"

The two scouts retired to the room allotted to them and sought some much-needed repose. But for the life of him Buffalo Bill could not sleep. Those words of Conley's rang in his ears. What would he find at the Cougar King's that should surprise him so much, considering what he already knew?

Somehow he could not get rid of the idea that the words conveyed a threat. And yet, how could that be? A warning they might be intended for, but not a threat. Why should Conley, of all men, threaten him? No; the idea was absurd. The fatigues and excitements of the day had upset him. He resolutely put the idea out of his mind and tried to get the much-needed sleep.

Everybody in the house had retired. There was not a sound to be heard till, after Buffalo Bill had lain for nearly two hours, he heard steps approaching the house along the street. Some late birds going home, he thought, when the steps seemed to halt at the door.

A moment later he heard a low whistle, followed by a sound as if a

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window were being opened. In a second he was off the bed, his movement waking Frank Powell, and had reached the window. A couple of men were standing back from the house gazing up at one of the windows. One of them seemed to be talking. He was a little, dapper man, but his face was unfamiliar to Buffalo Bill. Not so his companion, in whom the scout recognised the form and features of Pete Curwen.

Frank Powell also recognised him, and the two scouts felt utterly puzzled to account for this man daring to visit Conley at this hour.

"What on earth could he want with him?" whispered Buffalo Bill. "Conley said he scarcely knew him, yet here he is at this unearthly hour!"

"P'r'aps he's turned traitor, and is going to guide Conley to Buck Blunt's hiding-place."

"Not likely, Frank. He'd have colared Buck himself, and just brought him in if he had wanted to do so. And, besides, it's the little man who's doing the talking. Ah! there goes the window down. They're not moving off. That looks as if they were coming in."

"Someone's going down, sure enough," whispered Frank, as the stairs creaked ever so little. "There goes a bolt. Yes, they're coming in."

"Gad! I'd like to hear what they've come for," said Buffalo Bill. "D'you think it's possible, Frank?"

"Doubtful. Still, 'pon my soul, I believe it's worth trying."

"So think I. Here goes to try it, anyway!"

He crossed to the door and opened it noiselessly, but the moment he moved to go out the furious barking of a small terrier, which seemed to be on the landing outside, compelled him to come in and hastily close the door.

"Euchred!" he ejaculated. "Was that tyke put there on purpose?"

"Why? What should Conley do that for?" asked Powell in surprise. He knew nothing of the scout's doubts. "You don't think Conley's not acting on the square, do you?"

"Blessed if I know what to think, Frank, and that's a fact! I've been worrying myself ever since we came up, and yet I've had no real reason to do so as far as I know; and now comes

Pete Curwen, of all men, the friend of Buck Blunt, and is admitted to the house at this unholy hour! What's he here for, I wonder?"

"Only for the reason I suggest," said Frank. "I bet you'll find it's so when morning comes."

But for all that Frank Powell could say, and his own better feelings prompt, Buffalo Bill felt sure there was a mystery somewhere.

Half an hour passed without anything occurring, when a tap came at the door, and throwing it open they saw Conley standing with a lamp in his hand.

"Ah! you are awake," he exclaimed, "and dressed, too! That's lucky. It will save time."

"Why, what's up? Do you want us?"

"Yes, if you want to catch Buck Blunt."

"That goes without saying. Where is he to be found?"

"There are two men below who have offered to show you and deliver him over. You mentioned Pete Curwen this evening."

"Yes. Is he one of the men?"

"He is. He and a friend of his and one of my Vigilantes, Cyrus Hardy. Do you know him?"

"Never heard of him as far as I know, except that I believe he was mentioned in the Rock Owl saloon."

"Exactly. Pete was going to kill him, for he helped to drive the man from the town. But Cy has a persuasive way with him, and got Pete under. He offered the man a free pardon for various little peccadilloes if he would stand by him in another affair. Now, Pete swears he can lay his hand on Buck Blunt, and only came in to see if I could make it worth his while to capture him."

"There's only one answer to that!" laughed Buffalo Bill, whose faith in Conley was completely restored now that the motive of the men's visit was explained. "We'd better start at once. Can you lend us some horses?"

"One with pleasure; but it will be better for you not to appear on it, Bill. You're too well known. The people Buck is with don't know Doctor Powell,

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and I guess we can trust him to make the capture."

"I'd rather be with him, though."

"Naturally; but two will really not be needed. There will be Hardy with you, and I can assure you he's no slouch in such matters. He's my right-hand man, and a better can't be found. Besides," he added, as Buffalo Bill still seemed to hesitate, "the place where Buck is lying is right at the back of the Shadow Pools, a five hours' trip or more from here. You could not be back before midday to-morrow, and I reckoned on getting you out to Filson's long before then. I couldn't go in the afternoon; but, of course, if you like to put off that trip, and don't mind the risk of spoiling Buck's capture by being recognised too soon, you'd better go with the doctor."

"I guess Conley's right, Bill!" exclaimed Frank Powell. "I'll carry the thing through all right, and you won't be wasting time over Ben Blunden's affair."

"All right, Frank. That settles it," said the scout. "Can we see the men, Conley?"

"Sure. Come right on down and be introduced. Pete Curwen's a sly dog, but I'll guarantee he doesn't bite."

They found the two men sitting in a room which Conley used as an office. Cyrus Hardy was all bows as he was introduced to the famous scouts, but Curwen scarcely looked at them, except at such times as he thought he could do so without being noticed. Then his eyes took on a tigerish gleam, whilst a cunning leer twisted his mouth.

"It does me real proud, Buffalo Bill, to at last make your acquaintance," said Cy Hardy. "It is not often one has the pleasure of meeting with a man who is famous over the whole glorious Land o' Freedom."

"I'm pleased to meet you," replied the scout, laughing at Hardy's extravagant style and speech. "If you only fight as well as you talk, you're a wonder!"

"Your praise elevates me, sir," responded Hardy. "It is not the first time by a few that people of high intellectual powers like yourself have complimented me on the ability I

possess of speaking our glorious tongue with conspicuous fluency. For my fighting powers I must beg leave to refer you to our mutual friend, Nathan Conley. I should blush to sing my own praises."

"I guess he can pull a gun with anyone!" cried Conley. "But this talking won't collar Buck Blunt. You've got a long way to go, and you'd best be travelling."

Cy Hardy looked as if he were not over-pleased with this abrupt way of cutting short his rhetoric, but he was wise enough to acknowledge that Conley was right, and immediately moved towards the door.

"Our horses are at the stable," he said to Frank Powell. "We have provided one for you, or rather it was provided for Conley. We had little idea that we should be so fortunate as to find you gentlemen here and ready to accompany us."

"I'll be back midday to-morrow, Bill," said Frank, "and I hope to bring our man in, too, and to find that you have been successful in your job as well."

How wide his wishes were of their accomplishment he little knew. Many things were to happen before he and Buffalo Bill met again, things which he little dreamed of or expected.

## CHAPTER 6.

### Drugged and Trapped.

BUFFALO BILL had scarcely snatched two hours of restless sleep before Conley roused him, and after a hurried meal took him round to the stable, where their horses were already saddled for them. Scarcely a soul was about as they rode through the town. The Samaritans were not noted for early rising, preferring to burn the candle at the other end.

Nathan Conley was in a silent mood. He scarcely spoke unless first addressed, and then several times gave wrong answers.

Seeing he was so preoccupied the scout soon gave up the task of trying to carry on a conversation, though he was anxious to glean more facts about the man they were about to visit, the

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person whom he only knew by name as the Cougar King.

The way Conley guided him was entirely deserted. Not a house or shack could be seen two miles outside the town limits, and Conley selected what were evidently little-used trails, which led up into the hills through miles of close timber. But at last they came to a part the scout knew. Rock Owl was scarcely three miles distant northwards. He judged they would soon reach Filson's place, for he had gathered that it was not far from the camp, and at length he saw a building, partly of rough stone, crowning the summit of one of the hills.

Buffalo Bill noted its position carefully, and was by no means reassured by discovering that it was not far from the very plateau which he and the Doctor Scout had examined. The plateau lay on the other side of the hill, divided from it by a narrow valley. It was close enough in all conscience to the gorge, and he guessed that Brun Filson would be able to tell him all he wanted to know about that place and the secret cavern. That is, if he cared to do so, for as they approached the house the scout's old doubts rose again, though he could think of no reason why they should.

Nathan Conley's behaviour underwent a change, too. He seemed to wake up now, and was as lively as before he had been morose.

"You'd better get your guns ready, Bill," said Conley, with a chuckle. "Some of those cougar cubs may be about, and they are said to be rather partial to strangers, as they like a change of diet."

"They'll diet off lead pills if they monkey round with me!" declared the scout. "If one man likes to run risks by having the great cats playing round him he can't expect everyone else to be as crazy."

"Well, don't shoot 'em unless you're obliged," laughed Conley. "Filson values those cubs as much as the average man values his children. Keep quiet, and I'll guarantee they'll never attempt to hurt you. But they hate movement, especially where strangers are concerned, and I don't suppose you are over keen to fight with them."

"But they're only cubs, you said?"

"That's all. But cougar cubs are not like kittens, you know. They're pretty strong in the tooth, though not spiteful unless teased. But here we are! We'll be in luck if Filson's at home."

What Buffalo Bill saw of the house did not impress him with its beauty. It was low and squat, though covering a good amount of ground. One side of it aspired to an upper storey, but the greater part of it was only the height of the one room. The walls seemed to be of great thickness, and most of the lower windows were barred "to keep the cats in," as Conley explained while they were waiting for the door to be opened. This door was low and strongly built, and the whole place gave the scout the idea of a prison.

Buffalo Bill's thoughts were disturbed by the sudden opening of the door and the appearance of the man whom he had heard so much about. The scout had ample time in which to examine the man whilst Conley went through the ceremony of introduction.

Brun Filson was of average height, but very powerful build, his chest and shoulders being out of all proportion. His great breadth indeed made him appear shorter than he really was, and this effect was increased by the way in which his head was sunk forward. A pair of small but piercing eyes gleamed out from under heavy brows. The greater part of his face was concealed by a heavy beard and moustache and long hair which fell on each side.

"Hallo, Brun!" Conley had cried. "We're lucky to find you in. I've brought an old friend over to see you. You've heard of him before now as Buffalo Bill, the army scout."

"You are welcome, sir!" replied Filson, turning to Buffalo Bill and extending his hand. "He'd be a deaf man indeed who had not heard of you."

He spoke in deep, mellow tones, and his speech showed him to be a man of education and good breeding.

"I hope we are not taking you too much unawares," said the scout, "but a matter of urgent importance has brought me out here."

"A matter of importance that affects me?" queried Filson, in a tone of surprise. "I am curious to know in what

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way an old hermit like myself can assist Buffalo Bill."

"We'll soon straighten that out," said Conley, "only it'd be more comfortable to do it inside, eh? That is, if your blamed cats are safe, Brun."

"They're always that, Nathan."

He gave a low, musical whistle. There was a rush of soft feet behind him, and two young lions fawned at his feet.

"There they are, sir! That is the extent of my family at present. The others got too playful and had to be put out of mischief. These wouldn't hurt an infant."

The two cubs turned from him to Buffalo Bill, and coming slowly forward investigated his boots and clothing. Then they jumped up and fawned on him, licking his hands with their rough tongues and showing every sign of pleasure.

"Ah, they know their friends!" exclaimed Filson heartily. "Trust a child and an animal for that. They seldom make a mistake. Come in here. It is nice and cool, and your long ride must have heated you."

He led them into a very comfortably-furnished room, dismissing the two cubs with a couple of words, and going to a cupboard took out a bottle of wine and some glasses.

"You must need a refresher," he said, as he filled up three glasses. "This will pick you up."

Buffalo Bill accepted the wine, but was cautious to drink none till he saw the others empty their glasses. A box of most excellent cigars was on the table, and was also duly passed round. Then commenced the detailing of the business on which the scout had come. He told his experiences of the preceding day, and noted the expression of genuine wonder and dismay on Filson's face.

Yes, the Cougar King knew the gorge perfectly well, and the cavern as well. It was there that he had captured several of his cubs, for he had early discovered that it was a favourite haunt of the savage cougars. But as to its being the hiding-place of a man such as Buffalo Bill had described he could scarcely have believed it. It was certainly some time since he had visited

it, and it was possible some such individual, with a similar power to what he himself possessed over the brute creation, had taken up his quarters there.

But Brun Filson evidently half-doubted the truth of the scout's tale, and plied him with so many questions that Buffalo Bill began to feel annoyed. He began to feel something else, too—a queer numbness of the brain, which he could not account for. It was almost as if he had taken too much to drink, and yet—Ah! heavens! had he been drugged?

The awful certainty that this was so came over him as he tried to rise. His limbs were numbed and helpless. He could with difficulty move his hand or arm. Now that the drug had got hold of him, it worked his ruin quickly. He saw Conley and the Cougar King sitting, as it were, a mile away. They were watching him with mocking smiles.

Now Conley said something. It sounded like the distant buzzing of bees. Now the Cougar King got up from his chair and walked towards him. The scout knew the man was feeling his pulse, yet he himself had lost all sense of touch.

Faces and voices recede further and further. A mist seems to shut out everything. The scout tries to call out once again, to rise from his chair, anything to shake off this frightful feeling of living death. But that effort is his last, and he sinks back unconscious, with his head falling over his breast and his arms hanging helplessly.

\* \* \* \* \*

How long it was that Buffalo Bill sat there bereft of sense and feeling he could not tell, but he gradually came out of his state of coma and endeavoured to collect his scattered senses. Things about the room became more distinct to the eye. He was able to move his hand and foot a little, and, after what seemed like an age, to move his head and body. Then the effects of the drug began to pass off more quickly, until at last the scout was able to see and move with almost his accustomed ease.

But with return of life and sense he discovered things which filled him with dismay. In the first place, his belt of arms had been removed, and he had not a single weapon of defence. The room

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had no other occupant but himself, he thought, till he heard a movement behind him, and turning, saw a cougar staring at him and licking its chops.

A low growl when he moved warned Buffalo Bill to remain quiet. He was alone with the formidable animal, and he could only conclude that he had been left behind to be devoured by it. And yet this, on second thoughts, seemed unlikely. The two men would never have left him there for such a purpose, but would have carried him to some other part of the building.

As his eyes regained their former functions he saw a knife on the table just within reach. It was a bowie-knife, much like his own, but whether it had been placed there by design or forgotten he could not, of course, tell. Probably the latter, for it was partially hidden under the opened lid of the cigar-box. That knife he must get hold of.

Very cautiously the scout advanced his body and hand. The movement must have been imperceptible to the cougar, or else it did not object to it as it did to more rapid procedure. It took Buffalo Bill a full quarter of an hour before he had got into such a position that he could just touch the knife. Then he as slowly dragged it towards him, and at length had it clasped in his hand and opened.

The feel of the weapon and the look of the bright, keen blade made a new man of him. He felt a match for a dozen cougars, with Conley and Filson into the bargain. But this certainly was not his bowie-knife. He turned it over and saw a name cut on the handle: "B. Blunden, Uvada."

"Good heavens! The sheriff's knife! The knife of the murdered Ben Blunden in the house of the Cougar King!"

All the meaning of this terrible piece of evidence flashed on him. The Cougar King had lied when he denied knowing anything of the scout's experiences in the cave. If he—Brun Filson—was not the man who had fired at them, it was someone in his employ. But what of Nathan Conley? How came it that he had enticed the scout to this place and calmly sat by whilst he was drugged?

Nathan Conley, the stern upholder of the law in Samaria, not only conniving at such wickedness, but helping the

Cougar King to put it in practice! The idea seemed incredible, only the proofs were convincing. This, then, was their plot, carried out with fiendish ingenuity. Frank Powell separated from him, and perhaps killed, too. Himself brought here to be destroyed, so that the only two outsiders who knew the secret of the sheriff's death should be silenced for ever.

Filson might have shot or stabbed him as he lay unconscious, but that was too quick and easy a death.

They meant to play with him first. No one knew where he had gone. No one would be in the remotest degree likely to interfere.

So they would have a little fun, frighten him with the lions, tantalise him with the sight of a feeble weapon, and, if he got hold of it, allow it to be the means of telling him that he could never be allowed to pass out of that place alive.

Yes, it was all worked out with fiendish regard to details. Only they did not reckon on one important factor.

That was the indomitable courage of Buffalo Bill.

Where some men would have sunk under the awful horror of the situation Buffalo Bill felt braced up by the very idea of the frightful difficulties and dangers to be confronted. If he was to be killed he'd die fighting. The first thing was to get rid of his guard, and to do so as noiselessly as possible. After that he would be free to look for some means of escape from the place.

The scout began very slowly, as before, to move round until he could see the animal. It was watching him curiously, but beyond an occasional growl did not do anything. He moved round sufficiently to be able to gaze at it, when his foot, pressed against the floor, slipped and shot out. In a second the cougar had leaped aside, the hair on its body erect, its eyes glowing like burning coals. Fortunately, it made no more noise than the low growls, but its lips drew back in an ugly snarl, and it crouched slowly to the ground.

More slowly still the scout rose, till he stood upright, his body bent a little forward, the knife raised ready to strike. Just then he heard sounds outside the door. A key was turned, the

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door opened, and he saw Conley's face, wreathed in an evil smile, peering at him, whilst two more of the great cats slunk past him into the room.

"Ah, you're awake, then, you fool!" said Conley. "I thought I heard the lion growling, and guessed you were ready for your fun. I hope you'll enjoy it."

He laughed wickedly as he drew back and shut and locked the door.

The cougar which had been about to attack Buffalo Bill had sunk down close to the ground at the sound of Conley's voice. Its companions crept round to it and commenced playing with it, taking no notice of the scout. This conduct was inexplicable, and was clearly not what Conley had intended.

Standing motionless the scout watched the beasts playing together, till one of them left his companions and going to the wall stood looking at it with its head on one side, as if listening. After a minute or two it put its nose to the ground and sniffed vigorously, and also up the side of a piece of ornamental woodwork; then it whined and stood listening again. The other animals soon joined it in this procedure.

Quick to reason out every sort of case the scout guessed directly that there was a sliding door there which led to another part of the house. If only he could get to it and find a means to open it he might yet escape. He remembered the tones of the voice in the cave as it called the lions off. Scarcely believing that it would have any effect now he imitated the command as nearly as he could recollect it.

The effect was almost ludicrous. The three cougars suddenly backed away, their ears lying flat back, teeth showing, and tails tucked between their legs. All three looked at Buffalo Bill with heads half-turned away, and slunk along to the wall to the further side of the room. The way was clear, and Buffalo Bill, advancing slowly, reached the panelled wall, the three cowed beasts lying still, watching every movement. With almost feverish haste he searched for a clue to the opening of the secret door. It was undoubtedly such, for quite a little current of air blew in through the cracks.

The scout looked carefully along the ornamental woodwork, but could see nothing. Then, looking along the base of the panel, he noticed that the ridge of wood running along parallel with the floor bore the marks of dirty fingers. He stooped, and, getting his fingers under the ridge, lifted. The panel rose without a sound, but it was heavy, and he knew it was steel or iron, painted to represent woodwork.

But a surprise which nearly cost him his life, now occurred. The door was hardly raised eighteen inches, when the huge head and shoulders of a monster cougar were thrust through. Buffalo Bill drew aside instantly, but never released his hold on the panel, and with a sudden angry roar the great beast dashed through into the room.

Now the scout gave himself up for lost, expecting every instant to be attacked, when, to his amazement, the three cougars, who all this time had been watching his actions intently, answering the roar, dashed forward at the newcomer, and all four were instantly engaged in a terrific combat.

Scarcely able to believe in his good fortune, Cody passed through the opening in pretty quick time and allowed the panel to slip down into its place. There seemed no way of fastening it, so after a brief search he struck a light to see into what manner of place he had come. Apparently it was a narrow passage, sloping downwards, where he could not tell. He turned for a moment to see if he could not secure the panel, when the light glinted on some metalwork, and he saw a lamp placed ready on a small shelf.

All this time the muffled sounds of the combat between the savage brutes in the room came through the partition. The scout quickly lighted the lamp and turned to examine the door by its light, when he heard a shout from the room beyond rising above the noise of the fighting cougars. There was no time to waste now. His escape had been discovered. In a few seconds, perhaps, his enemies would be after him.

Holding the light above his head Buffalo Bill rushed away down the rapidly-descending tunnel till it terminated in a cavern. Suppose there

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was no outlet to this place! He held the light closer to the ground! Good! There was quite a well-worn trail through the soft, sandy earth, leading straight from the tunnel across the cavern. It was a pretty frequently used route by all appearances. He went along it confidently now, reached the other side of the cavern, and entered another tunnel, or gallery, where in places the roof was so low he had to bend nearly double to pass through.

This tunnel seemed never-ending, though one or two others branched off from it. Buffalo Bill did not trouble these. He was only concerned to follow the trail which he felt morally convinced led to the place where he and Frank had found the body of Blunden. But suddenly he stopped still at the sound of a deep, booming roar. It came from behind him. Then the cougars had been separated, and were now chasing him.

It was hard luck after being so near escape. Another five or ten minutes, perhaps, and the scout would have reached safety. Now it was life or death. He hurried on again till the gallery narrowed down till it would scarcely admit of his getting through. A good place to stop the brutes, unless they were backed up by men with rifles or revolvers. Anyway, it was his one chance.

Nearer came the threatening roar, booming down the narrow corridor like the sound of a huge drum, and then at last Buffalo Bill saw the gleaming eyes of the cougar far up the passage. The animal saw him, too, and changing its roar to almost a scream of fury it came in a series of tremendous leaps.

At a distance of six feet it halted, snarling at him. Its coat was gashed and smeared with blood. He saw it was the same animal that had sprung in under the panel door. So, for a moment the duellists faced each other, as if to measure their strength. Then the cougar crouched low, every muscle showed strong under its coat, and it launched forward and upward with forepaws wide extended.

At the same instant the scout lifted the lantern and flashed it full in the beast's eyes, and slipping aside escaped what would have been a fatal blow by a hair's-breadth, whilst he drove his

knife with the full strength of his arm into the cougar's side. The animal fell with a crash just beyond the place where the scout had been standing, its head sagged back, the great limbs twitched violently, and all was over. The scout's knife had split its heart.

Without waiting an instant Buffalo Bill sped on again, perfectly guided by the well-marked trail, till in turning a sharp bend he found himself on a narrow ledge overlooking another cavern. It only needed one glance to assure him that this was actually the cave leading out of the gorge—the scene of Ben Blunden's death. It was easy work clambering down to the floor, and he sprinted away for the opening as he had never run before.

Poor Blunden's body had disappeared entirely, and the scout shuddered to think how. He half-paused at the spot where he remembered it had lain, when a loud explosion, followed by a bullet which smashed the lantern, sent him post-haste towards the exit.

Filson and Conley were after him. Oh, for the feel of his beloved rifle! He would face them out then. As it was he had no recourse but rapid flight. He followed the former tactics, as soon as he reached the open air, of climbing up instead of down. By so doing he governed the mouth of the cave and knew that he could prevent either man coming out by the aid of a few well-aimed rocks.

Buffalo Bill had not quite reached their former position, when Conley dashed out of the cavern and gazed down into the gorge. The rascal, seeing no one down there, was just turning his head to look upwards, when a three-pound stone caught him on the temple and stretched him senseless on the platform. It was a perfect shot, and a bullet could not have put him out of court more effectually.

The scout had begun to scramble down so as to secure the villain's weapons, when he saw the business end of another rifle protrude from the mouth of the cavern. It was no use attempting to go down in the face of that, for, unlike Conley, the man—Filson, no doubt—knew better than to expose himself, so after waiting for

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some time without seeing more of him Buffalo Bill carefully picked his way from the dangerous neighbourhood.

### CHAPTER 7.

#### The End of the Cougar King.

CONFIDENT, from what had happened to himself that Frank Powell had also met with foul play, Buffalo Bill did not let the grass grow under his feet. There was just the off-chance that the Doctor Scout had not been killed, but was being held prisoner. This fact would have to be settled first. If he found his friend had been killed Buffalo Bill vowed that he would not rest till every one of the accursed gang had paid the penalty. If, on the other hand, he was fortunate enough to find that he was still alive, he felt that nothing should stop him from effecting a rescue.

But the scout was seriously handicapped in the accomplishment of such a task. Armed only with poor Ben Blunden's bowie-knife how could he possibly hope to make way against the desperate men who guarded their prisoner? Buck Blunt and Pete Curwen, he knew, would be on guard, and, long before he found the trail and could discover the place to which they had taken Frank, the Cougar King, Nathan Conley, Cy Hardy, and perhaps a dozen more would be on the spot.

It seemed a hopeless case on the face of it, but Buffalo Bill never counted the odds. He knew how often a little piece of luck or a bold dash would level things up and carry a man over apparently impossible obstacles, so he set off across the hills with the calm resolve to work this thing out to the bitter end.

The first thing was to pick up the trail of the Doctor Scout and his companions. To do this he would have to work away to the north-east of Rock Owl, and keep on till he intersected their line of route. He broke into an Indian dog-trot, which carried him over the ground at a good rate, and could be kept up for miles without exhausting him. Only when he neared what he expected would be the part through which they passed did he drop to a walk, so as not to overrun the line.

In a soft piece of bottom land Buffalo

Bill came on it. The moment he saw the hoof-marks he was convinced it was the trail he sought, and it only needed a brief examination to show that three horses, no more and no less, had travelled that way. In due time he came to a place where the horses had been tied up, and noted the different trails leading to and from it. It was not difficult to find where the three men had filed off. Good! Now he had the direction, and judged that the place where Buck Blunt had been concealed could not be far off.

Suddenly a sound caught his ear, and in a flash the scout had gone to cover behind a thick clump of trees, and was creeping like a snake towards the place from which the noise had proceeded.

What was his dismay to see Cyrus Hardy and half a dozen men walking along the trail which he wished to follow. They halted not far from him, and he could hear all they said.

"You'll stay here, you two," Hardy was saying. "Keep well in amongst the timber, and don't move or speak. Buffalo Bill's on the trail to rescue his pard, and he's bound to come along here. It's the only way he could find the shack."

"And s'pose he comes?" asked one of the men. "Is we ter jump him or shoot?"

"Neither, you fool! Just let him run on further into the trap. Then follow along but not so that he can see or hear."

"And s'pose he spots you an' the others, and tries to do a bolt, eh?"

"Then shoot; but not to kill, if you can avoid it. We want to talk to him first. You understand? That's good! Now, you others, come along to your places."

Cy Hardy went off with the other four men, whilst the two he had left turned to find hiding-places.

"We'd best go each side of the trail, Zak," said one. "You stay this side and I'll locate the other. He'll pass between us then, or if he hunts a bit off the track we'll be more liable to spot him."

Zak, a great, slab-sided, coarse-looking brute, nodded and sauntered towards Buffalo Bill, chewing slowly.

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He chose a place within a few feet of the scout, who had feared he was coming right on to him and was prepared to give him a warm welcome. The man leant against one of the trees, chewing steadily and looking towards the trail. Then, getting tired of holding his rifle, he placed it against the tree and began to search for knife and tobacco-plug to cut a new "chaw."

The temptation was altogether too much for Buffalo Bill. He had intended to creep quietly past him and go on through the other guards. But the sight of that weapon, which was so necessary to the success of his undertaking, altered his plan. He crept instead towards Zak, who, wrapped up for a moment in his important task of cutting a "chaw" of the exact size necessary to his happiness, was entirely oblivious to the fact that anyone, let alone the scout, was close to him.

At last Buffalo Bill was within reach of the weapon, stretched out his hand and grasped it, lifted it, and felt he had won the second move in the game. Zak never stirred, except to polish his knife on his sleeve, till he heard a voice, perfectly distinct though scarcely raised above a whisper, order him to throw up his hands. At the same instant he felt the chill of the steel as the rifle-barrel was pressed against his neck. Like most Westerners he obeyed mechanically and instantly.

"Make a sound and I'll fire!" whispered Buffalo Bill, as he passed his hand round and unbuckled Zak's belt of arms.

"Now face round and walk off in front of me. Tread quietly, or I shall have to drop you, after all."

Still with his hands well elevated Zak obeyed. He had no need to see Buffalo Bill to know who it was who had so handsomely beaten him. The scout drove him on till they had put fifty yards between them and the trail.

"Now, Zak," he said, "I've no time to fool round with you. I ought to kill you, really, but I'm willing to do a trade with you. Your life for information that I want."

"Oh, finish it and have done with it, Bill!" said Zak coolly. "You'll kill me, anyway, I take it, and if you don't Conley will for lettin' you through."

"I give you my word, Zak, I'll never

trouble you again if you act square by me. As to Conley, that's your lookout; but I believe there are one or two places on this continent besides Rock Owl."

The man's eyes glistened. He took the bait.

"Ef you're that way of thinkin', Bill, I'll be your man. You always was a square dealer, and I'll tell what I know and will act square by you."

"Fire ahead, then, and tell me where Frank Powell is."

Zak gave him the desired information, and also told him how Conley and Brun Filson, on finding that Buffalo Bill had escaped, had guessed that he would at once go on the trail of Frank Powell, and had laid plans to again entrap him.

"That's about what I expected," Buffalo Bill said. "Now, Zak, we understand each other, and you'd best make tracks. I'm willing to trust your word not to betray my presence here. That's so, isn't it?"

"So every time, pard. I don't go back once I've promised a thing, and, what's more, I ain't sure as I can't help you a bit further."

"How?" asked the scout.

"By startin' a racket and bringin' the hull durned crowd after you down here. That will give you a cl'ar field to work in, and ef you can't get Frank away, then you'll never have another chance."

The scout gazed fixedly at Zak. The proposal was as good as could be made, if only the man was to be trusted.

"It's a fact, I sw'ar!" said Zak earnestly. "I'm dead sick o' the hull gang, and if you like to give me a clean ticket ter some other place I'll quit the business for good."

"Done with you, Zak!" said the scout. "Here's one of your revolvers. Wait for twenty minutes. That will give me time to work clear round the valley, so as to come on the hut from the other side. They'll not be looking for me there. After twenty minutes you can start your racket. But don't let them see you, or they'll suspect other things."

Zak, with a look of blank astonishment on his face, took the weapon.

"Blamed ef you don't take the biscuit, Bill!" he said. "Thar ain't another man in the hull United States of Amurrica that would have passed over

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a gun to a feller like me. I'm yours to command f'm this moment. And I let you know ef——"

The scout held up his hand and dragged him to the ground as they heard someone passing through the bushes a little way off. The man seemed to hesitate, and then came on towards them, paused again, and went off towards the place where Zak had been posted. They just caught a glimpse of him and saw it was Cyrus Hardy.

"Lend me my knife, quick, pard!" Zak whispered. "If he finds I'm missin' he'll raise Cain, and your chances will be gone."

Buffalo Bill handed him his bowie-knife without a word. Zak glided off amongst the trees after Hardy.

"This will be a test if he's all right or not," thought the scout, and waited anxiously for the result.

Scarcely five minutes passed before he heard a faint cry. Was it a signal? Hardly, for it was not taken up in other directions. His doubts were ended by seeing Zak hurrying towards him carrying a rifle and a belt of arms.

"He's out of the game!" exclaimed the man calmly. "Dropped the fust blow. But you'll have to lump yourself, Bill. He may be found, and then the trick will be spoiled. Hyer's his guns. You'd best take the revolvers for Frank, and lemme have my rifle in exchange for this. It will look better if the others see me."

"I'll not forget, Zak," answered the scout. "Rock Owl can boast of one good man, anyway."

Then he turned and bounded away to the west, whilst Zak went slowly back to the place where he should start the alarm.

Meanwhile, Nathan Conley and Brun Filson had made their arrangements to the best of their ability. They had brought some thirty men from Rock Owl, and these had been posted, some near the hut and the greater part along the trail that Buffalo Bill was expected to take. Those under Cy Hardy were the outermost ring, who were only expected to give notice of the scout's approach, or prevent his escape if he tried to retreat.

Filson and Conley were now talking in front of the hut with Buck Blunt

and Curwen, describing to those astonished individuals the manner of Buffalo Bill's escape. In the middle of the narration distant shots, and even cries, were heard.

"Gee! Ef he ain't out there!" shouted Buck Blunt.

"He's discovered some of the outposts!" cried Conley, as other shots were heard. "The fools must have let themselves be seen too soon. Come on, Brun! Call in the others. We must try to surround him."

Buck Blunt was running off, too, but Conley stopped him.

"You and Pete keep watch here in case he breaks through!" he shouted. "You'd best kill him on sight instead of risking any more."

Then he dashed away, followed by Brun Filson, who, despite his massive frame, covered ground at a great rate.

"He'll not git through this journey, Buck," laughed Pete Curwen. "They're drivin' him back now. The rest of the boyees must be up to him now, and he'll have to quit mighty sharp or be killed."

"I ain't so sure of that, Pete. The Buffler's about the hardest man a-dyin' I know of. He's seen more fightin', white and Injun, I reckon, than any man in the State, yit here he is comin' up smilin' every time!"

"Quite right, Buck! Elevate, both of you!"

It was Buffalo Bill who spoke.

Buck Blunt wheeled round and drew his gun in a single movement, firing at the point the voice came from. But another shot rang out almost with his, and Buck Blunt, murderer and desperado, fell to the ground without a cry. Instantly Buffalo Bill stepped from the side of the shack.

"Slip that belt off, Pete!" he commanded.

The ruffian's belt of arms fell to the ground.

"Now, then, quick into the hut and untie Frank Powell!"

Pete obeyed and entered the hut, Buffalo Bill coming close behind. The scout's knife made short work of the rawhides, and Frank Powell, stiff from his long confinement, struggled to his feet.

"You're always welcome, Bill," he

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said, "but never so much as now. Shoo! I've not a bit of feeling in my limbs! They tied me tight enough this journey."

"You can hold a gun, anyway, I reckon," laughed the scout, as he handed one to him. "I'll just fix our friend there, and then we'll quit."

Pete submitted without a word to be bound hand and foot. It was preferable to being shot.

Buffalo Bill shut the shack door, and, having secured Buck Blunt's "tools" and those Pete had dropped, led Frank to the back of the shack and through the pines till they came to the place where Conley and the others had picketed their horses. The whole bunch was released and scattered in all directions under his blows, except two of the best, which he and Frank mounted.

"Where to, Bill?" asked the latter. "Samaria, I suppose?"

"No Samaria for us yet, Frank. Conley will be scared to go back there. We must go where we can find him, and where he's sure to run."

"And where's that?"

"To the house on the hill, the home of Brun Filson, the Cougar King!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Nathan Conley and Brun Filson were standing together when the two shots were fired near the shack. There was at that moment a lull in the shooting near them. They started and stared at each other.

"That came from the shack," declared Conley.

"Yes, and there were two shots fired close together."

"Then that demon has fooled us again!" declared Conley, pale with suppressed anger. "Whilst we've been fooling round here he's run through us, and it's a thousand to one he's killed those two."

They dashed through the scrub as fast as the close-growing trees would allow, across the valley, and up towards the shack. As they came within sight of it Conley gave another shout, and was leaping out of the shelter of the trees when Filson stopped him.

"Yes, I see," said the latter. "That's Buck Blunt lying there. But don't you see the door of the shack is shut?"

They're in there waiting to kill us as we come up."

But just at that moment two of the stray horses came slowly out of the scrub, cropping the scanty grass.

"They've stampeded the horses!" cried the Cougar King. "They're not in the hut at all, Conley! They've gone to Samaria, and we had best seek safety at the house."

Three or four of the horses were found quietly grazing not far off, and the two men were soon galloping by the nearest route for the house on the hill. Suddenly Brun Filson pulled up.

"We're fools!" he cried. "We're just running our heads into the noose! Those two will be waiting for us at the house!"

"What makes you think so?"

"Anyone else would go to Samaria for help, I guess, but Buffalo Bill isn't built that way. He'll guess you won't dare to go to Samaria, but will run for my place. They've ridden straight there, you mark my words!"

"You're right, I do believe," said Conley, whilst a wicked light came into his eyes. "It'd be almost too good to be true, Brun. But if they've done that the game may yet be ours."

"Yes; but we'll have to alter the programme. If they're there they'll be in the house. They can't guard all the entrances, and I'll bet they'll never look for us from the cave. We'll ride to the gorge, Nat, set the lions loose, and have our fun, after all!"

Arrived at the gorge they dismounted and climbed carefully up to the cave. Brun Filson took the lead. Nat Conley had not the same control over the dangerous beasts that he had, and it was just possible some of the wild ones had come in from the hills and would be ready to spring on them. They had not gone fifty yards along the passage before the Cougar King saw the gleaming eyes of one of the beasts in front. He stopped and gave a peculiar call like the purring of a huge cat. The eyes wavered and vanished.

"It's a wild one," he said to Conley. "That's what I feared. I wish we had a lantern."

For some distance they went on, faster now that they could feel their

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way, till Conley happened to turn round and saw some horrible, glowing eyes scarcely twenty feet away.

"There are two of the brutes behind us," he whispered to Brun. "They are following us, sure!"

The words were scarcely uttered before a most appalling roar broke out, not behind, but ahead of them.

"What's to be done?" shouted Conley, now thoroughly alarmed. "They seem to be advancing on us!"

"We must go on, Nat. There's only one in front. If the worst comes to the worst, we must kill it. Look out for its eyes, and aim as well as you can at them. We'll fire together."

Slowly they crept forward. The terrible roaring ceased as suddenly as it had begun; but they could see no tell-tale eyes ahead.

"There we are, Nat. Ten yards more and we shall be safe."

Brun Filson tried to speak in a reassuring manner, but the next moment proved that his hopes were vain.

A terrible snarl seemed to mock at the words. The animal in front, finding it could retreat no further, was at bay, and would fight till the last gasp.

"We shall have to do it, Nat! See! there are its eyes now. Aim just below them. Are you ready?"

Conley's revolver was levelled, and they fired together, the reports sounding like the discharge of cannon. They were followed by a most appalling scream from the cougar, which must have been wounded, but was certainly not killed, for it leaped forward and hurled Filson to the ground. The man fired upwards twice in his agony, but the cougar's teeth gripped his chest, whilst it tore viciously at his body with its claws.

Conley, wild with the horror of the thing, fired downwards, scarcely knowing what he was doing. Then he leaped towards the door, thereby escaping for the time; but the lions behind had caught the scent of blood, and, unmindful of the reports of the guns, came leaping towards him. He reached the door and beat on it frantically, forgetting in his terror to try to lift it. But the lions, which had stopped for a second or two near Brun Filson and his

antagonist, charged again, leaped on him, and bore him to the ground.

Conley's hammerings and yells had been heard. The two scouts, having gained the house, were watching the front part for the return of the Cougar King, and expected Conley to be with him. The sound of the hammering at first puzzled them, and they could not decide exactly which point it came from. Then the scout remembered the iron door, and rushed along the passages into the room which he remembered so well.

The hammerings had ceased by then.

"Stand on one side, Frank," he said. "It may be our friends, and they'll try to rush us. Be ready to drop them if they show fight."

He lifted the door a little way. A furious snarling and growling made him nearly close it again, only he heard a ghastly groan which sounded human enough.

"Good heavens, the cougars have them, Frank! Lie down and give them a surprise. Aim about on a foot-high level."

Frank Powell sent a stream of bullets from his repeater down the gallery, whilst Buffalo Bill kept the trap up. Growls and snarls, mingled with screams of pain, showed that the animals were not happy. Then, as he emptied his rifle, the growlings ceased, and all was still.

"They've gone off, Frank. Light that lantern and we'll see what can be done."

But there was nothing to be done by now. Both the wretched men were dead. Two dead lions lay across Conley's body, a third lay close to Brun Filson, with the latter's knife buried to the hilt in its side.

The Cougar King had died fighting his own pets!

THE END.

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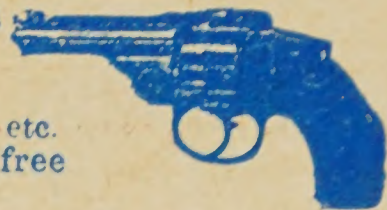
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